

Ideas for Creating and Using Dialogues: Some hints and guidelines

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Language Learning for Life

We have all seen and used dialogues in English language learning textbooks. It seems safe to say that dialogues are a fundamental feature of language teaching materials. But why? What is the role or function of dialogues in a language lesson or a textbook chapter? What qualities do dialogues offer us that other English texts do not? In what ways do studying, analyzing, creating, or using dialogues aid in second language acquisition? In this paper I will attempt to answer these questions by first focusing upon several discursive features of language which are deemed essential to interactive communication. I will then illustrate how, by employing these discursive features, dialogues can be created for productive, pedagogically sound purposes.

英語学習用の教科書では対話を目にするし、またそれが利用されている。対話が語学教材の基本的な特徴であるといっても問題はないようだ。しかしなぜであるか。語学レッスンや教科書の章における対話の役割や機能はなんであるか。他の英文にはない、対話を提供する特性とはどのようなものだろうか。対話を勉強、分析、または作成し、利用することが、第二言語習得においてどのように役に立つのだろうか。本論文では、相互交流のあるコミュニケーションに不可欠と思われる言語の広範囲にわたる特徴にまず焦点をあて、これらの問題を追及する。そして、生産的で、教授の上で確かな目的のために、対話がいかに作られるのかを、これらの広範囲の特徴を利用して説明する。

Halliday's Three Meta-Functions of Text

The noted linguist Halliday (1985) argued that all texts, whether written or spoken, serve three meta-functions: ideational, textual, and interpersonal.

The *ideational* function refers to the function of basically giving voice to an idea or describing a reality. A sentence such as, “The dog chased the cat” is an example of a text that is almost entirely ideational. The *textual* meta-function refers to those features that help language to be organized, to cohere, and connect ideas. The words in italics in the following sample serve a textual meta-function: “*So, that’s why that dog chased that cat*”. The interpersonal meta-function serves to express feelings, attitudes, or relationships. The *interpersonal* items in the following text are italicized: “*Oh my goodness!* So that’s why that *awful* dog chased that *poor* cat!”

When only one or two of these meta-functions dominate a text it tends to appear *wooden* or unnatural to most. This is a quality that affects the authenticity of computer-generated language (Tatham & Lewis, 1995). Movie, theatre, or television scripts can also seem turgid if the three functions are not in evidence. For an example, see McCarthy and Carter’s (1994, p118-121) analysis of a successful Australian TV program script.

This raises some pertinent questions regarding dialogues for educators. Are the dialogues that appear in textbooks displaying all three meta-functions? Do teachers who make their own materials include all three meta-functions in their dialogues? If and when dialogues do contain all three functions, are teachers aware of, and do they focus upon, these features for the benefit of their students? An overemphasis on ideational features is a dangerous temptation. Textual and interpersonal functions are often ignored by both materials makers and teachers (Almann 2001; Cook, 2002). Perhaps they are considered to be extemporary to the central message and therefore of less importance, but they are in fact an indispensable element of communication, particularly in interactive settings—skills which are widely considered to be an area of great weakness for Japanese learners of English.

The Role and Function of Dialogues

To some extent we have already begun to answer the question posed earlier: What is the pedagogical function of a dialogue vis-à-vis other samples of language? One clear answer is that dialogues are interactive. They are usually real time, largely unpredictable, and dynamic. Thus one would expect that a dialogue would naturally include interpersonal features of language. Moreover, dialogues involve two or more interlocutors, which means that dialogues are organized and arranged in a manner distinct from monologue-based forms of language. This means that unique textual functions, connected to the inevitable *negotiation of meaning* that authentic dialogues entail must be included and noted. All the aforementioned features indicate the clear

stylistic differences between written and spoken English. As Brown and Yule (1999) and McCarthy (1998) argue, we are not serving the needs of language learners if we teach the spoken language as if it were the same as its written form.

For practical purposes this would seem to indicate that unless features unique to dialogues are not those which are highlighted, practiced, or taught there is little reason to use a dialogue as a language model. As Widdowson (1983) points out, "...an overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities" (p.67). Therefore, noting or practicing basic sentence structure, while perhaps a worthy teaching or learning point, does not demand a dialogue format. Likewise, teaching or learning lesser-known vocabulary items that appear in the dialogue also does not demand, or make much use of, the dialogue. Rather, if a dialogue is being used, it is incumbent upon both teacher and learner to focus upon the qualities, both textual and interpersonal, that give dialogues their dynamism. It is these features that I will outline in the following section.

Discursive Features of Dialogues

In recent years, corpus studies have allowed researchers to note and quantify features of interactive language use that had hitherto been largely ignored in second language pedagogy. McCarthy (1996, 1998) and Schiffrin (1994) in particular have developed large bodies of work explaining these features and their discursive functions in English. Fortunately, since such publications first appeared it seems that these features appear to be finding their way into textbook sample dialogues with greater frequency (Carter,

Hughes & McCarthy, 2000; Hewings, 2002). But still it behooves a publisher or teacher to be wary of these features when selecting textbooks for publishing or classroom lessons. Following is a brief list and outline of some of the more common interactive features found in dialogues.

Environmental factors

If you have ever walked into a conversation halfway through, or if you have ever tried to overhear the conversation of others, you will realize that without certain background information even a native speaker of any language will fail to grasp what is being communicated. No amount of grammatical skill or lexical dexterity can make up for a lack of background, or paralinguistic, information. Most dialogues have goals or directions. They do not arise in vacuums. They involve interlocutors who have a relationship of some sort and are involved in some communicative event. They will generally behave according to roles and situational norms—with the patterns of languages used following suit (McCarthy, 1998).

Therefore, with any dialogue the reader must be able to quickly ascertain *who* the participants are, *where* they are, and *what* the purpose or direction of the dialogue is. Dialogue creators must make efforts to be sure that these factors can be understood by learners and readers. Teachers also should ensure that the learners have developed a sufficiently clear background frame of a given dialogue before any analysis or task based on that dialogue ensues. Moreover, any discussion or teaching of vocabulary and grammar patterns noted in the text will be severely retarded unless this environment is made sufficiently clear (Brown & Yule, 1999).

Another question that any learner or teacher approaching a dialogue must consider is whether the dialogue is basically transactional, or interactional. Transactional dialogue refers to those cases in which information is being imparted for some clear end or purpose. Most service encounters are transactional dialogues. Interactional dialogues are those that exist for phatic communion, or rather, developing and maintaining human relations. A quick exchange of morning greetings and small talk at the workplace might be an example of an interactional dialogue. Transactional dialogues will tend to be a bit more linear, goal-oriented, and will often utilize more features marking social distance. Interactive dialogues will naturally include many interactive qualities such as interjections, commenting, backchanneling, and will generally be less linear and more meandering than situational dialogues (Brown & Yule, 1999). However, most dialogues in fact tend to include elements of both forms, as we shall see later.

Discursive features and strategies

Dialogue creators must use the language forms that people in certain roles and situations would actually use. As McCarthy (1996) put it, “These [discourse types] are...very useful for language teachers and materials writers whose goal is to design activities that will generate output as close as possible to naturally occurring talk” (p.144). Recent discourse analysis research is replete with examples of such features. I will now outline and explain a few of these:

Negotiation of meaning

In a perfect world, interlocutors always understand each other's intentions immediately. In the real world this is not so. In dialogues, participants regularly play a game of checking, confirming, and elaborating in order to make their intentions or understanding clearer to their interlocutors.

Repair

In a perfect world all people speak clearly and correctly. In the real world this is not so. We regularly change grammatical courses halfway through utterances in order to re-orient our discourse. We reinforce or emphasize elements of our utterances that we feel may not have been expressed or understood accurately. We add non-sentential adjuncts onto the end of utterances to extend or clarify meanings. We ask others for clarification by expressing our lack of understanding. We reconfirm what others have said and even correct other's communicative shortcomings.

Backchanneling

A perfect world of discourse is not just a matter of correctly formulating grammatically sound sentences and correctly slotting in vocabulary. We give signals of understanding and confirmation, or the lack thereof. We indicate that we are listening, that we agree, are confused, or are uncertain. Without awareness and practice of backchanneling, there is a lack of collaboration, a sense that both sides are not contributing to the discourse, prompting McCarthy (1996) to state, "...teachers who want to train learners in narrative skills would do well to think of listeners as well as tellers." (p.141).

Pragmatic force

People do not always speak their intentions and feelings directly. Illocutions are used in dialogues to express intentions indirectly. These strategies often involve breaking the rules of prescriptive grammar in that they seem to be grammatically unrelated to, or irrelevant, in terms of the surrounding text. But in fact such strategies are often the discursive norm in any language (Searle, 1969).

Turn-taking and selecting

Most dialogues follow a certain order or pattern of interaction. When is it *my turn* to speak? How do we indicate a turn, or *select* a turn for our interlocutor? In fact, we regularly give subtle linguistic signals that indicate appropriate turn-taking procedures.

Signaling and framing mechanisms

Skilful discourse in any language is never merely a matter of uttering a series of well-formed sentences. How we arrange our thoughts into linguistics patterns involves ordering information in various ways. To give our interlocutor some idea of how our thoughts hold together we utilize signal words which help to make discourse coherent, to make the strands of time and logic more clearly understandable to others. These discourse markers very much represent the textual meta-function of language (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1995).

Commenting and Elaboration

Even the most banal transactional dialogues, often involve extension or additive commenting. This can take place either for social, phatic reasons, or as a lengthy form of repair (Carter & McCarthy, 1999).

Vague Language

When common backgrounds and environments exist in a dialogue it is quite normal for interlocutors to use general words or vague language. Items such as, *sort of, kind of, thing, stuff, like, and whatever* serve this function, a hallmark of spoken interaction.

Ellipsis

Again, when background information is shared or implicitly understood interlocutors need not use full sentence forms, but can and do delete certain elements of discourse. This can particularly be noted with responses in information transactions.

Since all of these interactive features of language have been widely identified as being essential to discourse in general, and dialogues in particular, we must now ask some questions. When developing lesson plans or tasks do our textbook dialogues utilize these features? If they do, are there any follow-up tasks that would emphasize or otherwise heighten awareness of these features? Do teachers notice these features? Do teachers include them in their homemade dialogues? Do teachers in any way emphasize them in analysis or follow-up tasks? If the answer to any

of these questions is “no” then one must wonder why the dialogue is being used at all. After all, if the distinctive feature of a dialogue is its dynamic, interactive, person-to-person immediacy, what sense does it make to omit or ignore the very language forms and patterns that express this dynamism, this essence of a dialogue? In short, what is the point?

Discursive features in a dialogue (Sample 1)

Let’s now look at some examples of how these features can be placed in a dialogue and get a clearer understanding of their discursive functions. To illustrate this, let’s look at two homemade examples in which a stranger asks a passer-by for directions on the street:

A: *Excuse me. Can you tell me where the bus station is?*

B: *Yes. Go down this road straight for two blocks until you come to the candy shop. Turn right and go three more blocks. You’ll see it on the right across from the Grand Hotel.*

While the grammar and vocabulary in the above are *perfect* the reader may well sense that it is a little *too perfect*. Since A and B are strangers, it is exceedingly odd that this dialogue contains absolutely no negotiation of meaning. Rather, B’s explanation is almost robotically linear. There is no hesitation, no confirming, no repair—the very features one would expect to see in an actual request for directions. It’s almost as if B has been rehearsing this answer, which is highly unlikely if the two are indeed strangers.

A: *Excuse me. Can you tell me where the bus station is?*

B: *The bus station? Hmm. Let's see. Do you know the arts centre?*

A: *Sorry?*

B: *The arts centre.*

A: *Ummm, no.*

B: *Well, it's sort of near there. OK. Well, if you head towards that tall building over there...*

Here we can see how imperfect people interact linguistically in an imperfect world (For similar features found in an authentic 'directions' discourse, see Brown & Yule, 1999, pp.92-98). In this short dialogue the following interactive strategies are realized:

Checking and confirming: *The bus station? Sorry? The arts centre*

Inexact/vague language: *Sort of*

Backchanneling: *OK*

Indirect strategies (using pragmatic force): *Do you know the arts center? Sorry?*

Signaling/Framing mechanisms: *Hmmm, let me see. Ummm*

Turn-taking: *Do you know the arts centre? Sorry?*

If such a dialogue is used or analyzed in a classroom, learners can note these very common interactive strategies

and the language forms that express them. The fact is that in reality people don't always understand each other readily or have tailor-made responses at hand. Thus, being able to use interactive strategies such as these in dialogues is essential. For example, if a non-native speaker of English does not know that *Sorry?* can be used not just as an apology, but also as a signal indicating a lack of understanding, their interactive skills will be severely curtailed. If they are not aware that backchanneling is necessary in order to re-confirm the nature of the interaction, or if they cannot de-code or use vague language to indicate uncertainty, misunderstandings can easily occur.

Discursive features in a dialogue (Sample 2)

One worry that many teachers or materials makers are likely to have is that these features are largely academic, and *get in the way* of understanding the basic message. It might be argued that when teaching children it is better to focus upon developing basic vocabulary or grammar skills and thus this interactive linguistic minutiae will be an impediment to language acquisition.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. In L1 children learn interactive strategies and the linguistic forms used to express these well before they become cognizant of grammatical patterns or have developed a wide-ranging vocabulary. Widdowson (1983) argues,

... we can make use of the learners' knowledge of non-verbal aspects of discourse, and of their ability to interpret them, as a means of linking their communicative abilities in their own language to

a realization of these abilities in the language they are learning (p.74).

McCarthy (1998) adds, “Most features of linguistic behaviour do ,sooner or later, carry over from one language to another...” (p.52).

Moreover, such interactive strategies actually serve to introduce grammar and vocabulary into natural communicative settings since these “...are discourse sensitive and not merely sentence-based abstractions”, (McCarthy, 1998, p.68). So, can child language acquisition be helped by noting and practicing dialogues which contain such interactive strategies? The evidence certainly suggests so. The only difference, it would seem, is that the grammar found in such dialogues would not always be of the formal full-sentence, S-V-O variety and the vocabulary would be more co-textual than isolated and abstract.

Let me now provide you with another homemade example to illustrate these points:

(Kiyomi and Cathy are meeting for the first time)

Kiyomi: *Hi. I'm Kiyomi Fukushima. Call me Kiyomi.*

Cathy: *Hi Kiyomi. Cathy Martin.*

Kiyomi: *So, where are you from, Cathy?*

Cathy: *Vancouver, Canada. How about you, Kiyomi?*

Kiyomi: *Saga, Japan.*

Cathy: *Sorry? Where?*

Kiyomi: *Japan. A place called Saga.*

Cathy: *Oh! Japan!*

The cross-cultural introduction is a language learning staple for beginners, and rightly so. The functions of introducing yourself, asking for and providing information, and generating a conversation from this, is a fundamental interactive skill. Interestingly though, readers may well note that in the above example though that there is no *difficult* vocabulary, nor complex grammar patterns. Yet the introduction is achieved succinctly and naturally. How is that possible? It is precisely because Kiyomi and Cathy are both utilizing many of the strategies mentioned earlier that the dialogue flows. Let's now look at some of those strategies:

Backchanneling: *Hi Kiyomi. Oh!*

Repair/Negotiation of meaning: *Sorry? Where? Japan. A place called Saga.*

Commenting: *Oh! Japan!*

Elaboration: *Call me Kiyomi. A place called Saga.*

Signals: *So, ...*

Ellipsis: *Cathy Martin. Vancouver, Canada. Where? Saga, Japan. Japan. A place called Saga.*

Turn-taking: *So, where are you from Cathy? How about you, Kiyomi?*

As we can see, this apparently simple dialogue is replete with interactive strategies both textual and interpersonal. Moreover, it still manages to include important set phrases,

(*Call me [name], How about you, [name]?*), and socio-cultural features (i.e., the repeated use of first names, *So...* as an appropriate signal for further discussion). Responses are expressed in non-sentential elliptic forms, grammatically and lexically simple, allowing beginners and young learners to avoid obtuse or obscure grammatical manipulations.

On top of that, this dialogue addresses a real need for beginners, the skill of introducing oneself to a non-native appropriately and getting a discussion going. All learners can surely relate to the necessity of having these skills. Simply focusing upon the ideational aspects of language is certainly not going to help achieve them.

Summary

Dialogues are pedagogically valuable texts largely because they express the interactive dynamism of language. Over and above mere ideational features of language and the related sentential grammar and slot-and-filler approaches to vocabulary, the interactive strategies and textual hints found in authentic dialogues are an essential feature of spoken communication. Therefore, makers of textbook or classroom dialogues for second language acquisition would do well to include such features in their materials. Moreover, teachers would do well to highlight and address these features rather than putting an inordinate amount of emphasis upon transforming sentence grammar, or translating discrete vocabulary items. Or, as McCarthy (1998) summarizes, "...transfer [between L1 and L2] is unlikely to occur if...the teaching materials and syllabus ignore or underplay those very features of lexico-grammar that give the spoken language its naturalistic flavour" (p.67).

Dialogues like these need not be complex or academic. In fact, as we have seen, it is quite easy to produce dialogues which can address practical needs and provide for the development of these interactive skills and yet can be mastered by children or beginners. If dialogues do not contain such features, or if the features are not exploited by the teacher, one must wonder at the purpose of creating the dialogue in the first place.

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